

# Women in Islam: Quranic Ideals Versus Muslim Realities

**Riffat Hassan**

**In spite of the fact that the Qur'an is particularly solicitous about women's well-being and development, women have been the targets of the most serious violations of human rights which occur in Muslim societies in general. Dr Hassan draws attention to the discrepancies which exist between Qur'anic ideals and Muslim practice with regard to a number of women-related issues, and highlights the challenge for Muslim women on the road from Cairo to Beijing.**

Muslim societies tend to discriminate against girl children from the moment of birth. It is customary amongst Muslims to regard a son as a gift from God, and a daughter as a trial. Therefore, the birth of a son is an occasion for celebration while the birth of a daughter calls for commiseration, if not lamentation. Here, it may be mentioned that though Muslims say with great pride that Islam abolished female infanticide, one of the most common crimes in many Muslim countries is the murder of women by their male relatives. These so-called "honour-killings" are frequently used to camouflage other kinds of crime.

### **Marriage**

There is much Qur'anic legislation which is aimed at protecting the rights of women in the context of marriage. However, many girls are married when they are still minors and do not understand that marriage in Islam is a contract and that women, as well as men, have the right to negotiate the terms of this contract. The Qur'anic description of man and woman in marriage: "They are your garments/ And you are their garments", implies closeness, mutuality and equality. However, Muslim societies in general have never regarded men and women as equal, particularly in the context of marriage. The husband, in fact, is regarded not only as the wife's *majazi khuda* (god in earthly form) but also as her gateway to heaven or hell and the arbiter of her final destiny. That such an idea can exist within the framework of Islam which, in theory, considers the deification of any human being as *shirk* – the one unforgivable sin according to the Qur'an – and rejects the idea that there can be any intermediary between a believer and God, represents both a profound irony and a great tragedy.

### **Marital problems and divorce**

While the Qur'an provides for just arbitration in case a marriage runs into

problems, it also makes provision for what we today call a "no-fault" divorce and does not make any adverse judgments about divorce. The Qur'anic prescription "Either live together in kindness or separate in kindness" preserves the spirit of amity and justice in the context of both marriage and divorce. In Muslim societies, however, divorce has been made extremely difficult for women, both legally and through social penalties.

### **Child rearing and child custody**

In the context of child rearing, the Qur'an states clearly that the divorced parents of a minor child must decide by mutual consultation how the child is to be raised and that they must not use the child to exploit each other. However, divorced women in Muslim societies are often subjected to great exploitation on account of their children, losing the right to the custody of both boys (generally at age 7) and girls (generally at age 12). It is difficult to imagine an act of greater cruelty than depriving a mother of her children simply because she is divorced.

### **Polygamy**

Polygamy was intended by the Qur'an to be for the protection of orphans and widows. However, in practice it has been widely misused and has been made into the Sword of Damocles which keeps women under constant threat.

### **Inheritance**

One of the most "revolutionary" steps taken by the Qur'an for the empowerment of women was to give women the right of inheritance. Few women in the world have had this right until the modern period. According to Qur'anic prescription not only could women inherit on the death of a close relative, they could also receive bequests or gifts during the lifetime of a benevolent caretaker. However, in general, Muslim societies have disapproved of the idea of giving wealth to a woman in preference to a man, even when she is economically disadvantaged or in need. The intent of the Qur'anic laws of inheritance was to give all members

of a family – including women as daughters, mothers, sisters and wives – a share in the inheritance so that the family wealth was equitably distributed amongst all the “legal” heirs. The fact that women – to whom no financial responsibility was ascribed – were given a share, indicates the concern of the Qur’an to give women financial autonomy and security.

However, Muslims have used the unequal share of men and women in some (not all) cases – e.g. in the case of a son whose share is twice that of a daughter – to argue that men are worth twice as much as women! A revised reading of the Qur’anic texts relating to inheritance is very important for combating the discriminatory attitude toward women in the context of inheritance, which is widely prevalent in Muslim societies.

### **Segregation and “*purdah*” or “veiling”**

Although the purpose of the Qur’anic legislation dealing with women’s dress and conduct was to make it safe for women to go about their daily business – which included the right to engage in gainful activity as testified to by Surah 4: An-Nisa’: 32 – without fear of sexual molestation or harassment, Muslim societies have segregated women or put them behind shrouds or veils and locked doors on the pretext of protecting their chastity. Amongst the changes brought about in the Muslim world by the onset of modernity has been the appearance in “public” space of an increasing number of women. The crossing by many women of the traditional boundary between the home and the world has, in fact, been a critical factor in bringing about the “Islamization” of a number of contemporary Muslim societies.

Massive efforts have been made by conservative Muslims to keep women segregated by insisting that a chaste Muslim woman ought to stay within the *chardeewari* (four walls) of the home. They have also insisted that a woman’s Muslim identity is determined, largely if not solely, by whether she covers her hair or not. The debate between veiled and unveiled women rages throughout

the Muslim communities of the world and has split Muslim women from Turkey to Indonesia as well as in the Western world into rival camps. Here, it is important to mention that according to the Qur'an confinement to the home was not the norm for chaste Muslim women but, rather, the punishment for unchaste women. Further, it needs to be noted that veiling has a history which pre-dates Islam and is profoundly linked with discriminatory ideas regarding women found in the Jewish and Christian traditions. The historical context of the Qur'anic prescriptions relating to *Hijab* (literally, "curtain") which refers to both seclusion and veiling also needs to be understood. Special focus needs to be put on the issue of segregation and *purdah* due to its multi-faceted and vast sociological impact on the lives of millions of Muslim women.

### **Family planning**

An overview of the sources of the Islamic tradition shows that there is much support for family planning within the religious and ethical framework, as well as the legal and philosophical literature, of Islam. Despite this fact, in practice, family planning programmes continue to fare badly in most Muslim societies, where birth rates are amongst the highest in the world. This is due, in part, to the fact that masses of Muslim women do not have adequate access to reliable means of contraception. But it is also due, in significant measure, to the widespread influence of conservative Muslims who proclaim from public platforms, as well as preach from mosque pulpits, that family planning is against Islam.

However, an examination of both the normative literature of Islam and the sociological factors which are relevant to the issue of family planning in contemporary Muslim societies provides strong evidence why the right

to use contraception should be regarded as a fundamental human right, especially in the case of disadvantaged Muslim women whose lives are scarred by grinding poverty and massive illiteracy.

#### **Other theological issues**

Other theological issues which are important in the context of gender justice and equity in Islam relate to statements which are widely made in Muslim societies to foreclose any discussion on the subject of women's equality with men. Amongst such statements are the following:

- the evidence of one man is equal to that of two women;
- a woman's blood-fine is one-half of a man's blood-fine;
- a woman is deficient in reason whereas a man is not;
- a woman is less than a man in prayer or worship (on account of menstruation, childbirth, etc.);
- righteous men will be rewarded by beautiful companions in the hereafter, but no such reward exists for righteous women;
- a woman cannot be a prophet.

#### **Other issues relating to women's health and well-being**

The negative ideas and attitudes regarding women which have become incorporated into the Islamic tradition have had a profound impact on the physical, psychological and emotional health of Muslim women. There is, therefore, urgent need to investigate the relationship or linkage between the state of women's health and the theological framework within which they live their lives. In particular it is important to examine the way in which masses of Muslim women perceive themselves and why many Muslim women have low self-esteem and put such little value on their life or its quality.

**From reactive to proactive –  
the challenge for Muslim  
women on the road from  
Cairo to Beijing**

The United Nations Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in September 1994, was an extremely important landmark in raising global consciousness with regard to a number of issues which are central to the lives of women. The Conference, which was held in one of the most important capitals of the Muslim world, was particularly momentous for Muslim women who participated in record numbers. The presence in Cairo of Al-Azhar University, the oldest university in the world, whose *fatwas* or religious proclamations carry much weight amongst Muslims, added further significance to the venue of this Conference.

In an opening session of the Conference, three male professors representing the Al-Azhar University presented what were labelled “Muslim viewpoints” on the subject of religion, population and development. Only a small part of their presentations, however, dealt with the topic of population and development which was the subject of the Conference. After stating that Islam was not against family planning but that it allowed abortion only to save the mother’s life or health, the speakers focused on the status or position of women in the Islamic tradition. The purpose of this panel presentation by high-powered representatives of the most prestigious Muslim university in the world, was to pre-empt any discussion on the subject of Muslim women by making the “privileged” position of women in Islam clear to both the Western media (which stereotypes Muslim women as “poor and oppressed”) and to Muslim women themselves.

In interventions from the floor, however, the “Muslim viewpoints” represented by the three male professors of the Al-Azhar University

were questioned, as voices of Muslim women were conspicuous by their absence in the panel of presenters. Muslim women demanded "equal time" and they got that and more in subsequent days when a number of sessions were held at the NGO Forum in which Muslim women figured significantly and in which women-related issues were explained by women themselves.

Women's identification with body rather than with mind and spirit is a common feature of many religious, cultural and philosophical traditions. However, though women have, traditionally, been identified with body, they have not been seen as "owners" of their bodies. The issue of who controls women's bodies – men, the state, the church, the community, or women themselves – was one of the most important underlying issues of the Cairo Conference. The fact that Muslim women forcefully challenged the traditional viewpoint, not only with regard to women's identification with body, but also with regard to the control of a woman's body, indicates that Muslim women are no longer nameless, faceless or voiceless and that they are ready to stand up and be counted.

It has now been accepted globally that issues which may appear to pertain primarily to a woman's body, in particular that of contraception and abortion, cannot be looked at in isolation from the larger factor of women's overall development as human beings. However, as pointed out by a number of persons and agencies, the primary focus of the Cairo Conference was on "population" issues focusing on the body, rather than on "development" issues which focus on the whole person.

The challenge before women in general and Muslim women in particular is to shift from the reactive mind set, in which it is necessary for women to assert their autonomy over



their bodies in the face of strong opposition from patriarchal structures and systems of thought and behaviour, to a proactive mind-set in which they can, finally, begin to speak of themselves as full and autonomous human beings who have not only a body, but also a mind and a spirit. What do Muslim women – who along with Muslim men have been designated as God's vicegerents on earth by the Qur'an – understand to be the meaning of their lives? Reacting against the Western model of human liberation no longer suffices, as a proactive orientation requires a positive formulation of one's goals and objectives. The critical issue on which Muslim women are called to reflect, with utmost seriousness, between the Conferences at Cairo and Beijing, is: what kind of model of self-actualization can be developed within the framework of normative Islam which takes account of Qur'anic ideals as well as the realities of the contemporary Muslim world?

Santayana remarked with acute insight that those who do not know their history are destined to repeat it. Until such time as the vast majority of Muslim women become aware of the religious ideas and attitudes which constitute the matrix in which their lives are rooted, it is not possible to usher in a new era and create a new history in which the Qur'anic vision of gender justice and equity becomes a reality.